

FIGHTING FOR THE WOMEN FRANCHISE IN INDIA (1917-1947) – A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This paper about the role played by the women association and prominent individuals like Margaret Cousins, Sarojini Naidu and Muthulakshmi Reddy for getting women franchise in India. The Indian Women's Movement was the chief force behind the struggle for women franchise. The first camping for women's franchise was started in the year 1917. Three women without much talent and personality, of which two were foreigners and one was an Indian had a deep impression in their mind to bring forth the Indian women and make them to participate in the struggle. Thus the seed sown by Annie Besant during the first quarter of the 20th century in the sphere of awakening of women through her Home Rule Movement and franchise movement paved the way for the entry and involvement of women in large scale in the arena of national politics. Since the women began to fight for their political rights and identify and socio-economic matters.

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INTRODUCTION

The struggle for the vote for women was broadly classified into two phases; the first from 1917 to 1928, when female enfranchisement and eligibility for female representation in legislatures was sought, the second until 1937, when attempts were made to broaden both terms of enfranchisement and representation in legislative bodies.^[1]

In 1917, the All India Women's deputation of 14 women leaders drew from all over the country, who were members of the Women's India Association waited upon Montague who was then the secretary of state for India and who visited India.^[2] A women's deputation demanded women's political rights and their role in the coming constitution of India and presented a memorandum to E.S. Montague in Madras. Sarojini Naidu was the leader and Margaret Cousins was the Secretary of this deputation. Other women leaders like Annie Besant, Malathi Patwardhan, Rani Lakshmibai Rajwadence, Naguthai Moropant Joshi

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were also included in this deputation. The memorandum also demanded also the enfranchisement of Indian women.^[3] The Bombay and Madras provincial conferences passed resolutions to remove the sex disqualification from the reform bill. The Andhra Provincial Conference, the Bombay special national congress, the Indian Home Rule League and the Muslim League passed resolution in favour of women's franchise. At the congress special session held in Bombay during 1918, Sarojini Naidu spoke on behalf of women's suffrage.^[4]

In 1919, the South Borough Franchise Committee visited India for further study about franchise. A women's deputation led by Annie Besant and Sarojini Naidu voiced the Committee for women's suffrage on equal terms with men. The committee accepted the petitions and interviewed a few provinces. After making a thorough study, the committee reported that women should be totally excluded from the franchisee. The committee suggested that the social customs in India were not conducive for granting franchise to women and as such suffrage would be premature.^[5] It overlooked the fact that women were already serving in municipal councils and other local bodies. But the committee appreciated those who supported the demand and so recommended that this matter should be reconsidered in the next revision.

The members of the Women's Indian Associations and Women's delegation who had worked vigorously for female franchise were very disappointed with the Committee. When the Joint Select Committee met in England, Annie Besant and Sarojini Naidu appeared for it.^[6] Sankaran Nair, the only Indian Member of the Southborough Committee asked the Bombay Committee to send a delegate along with Annie Besant and Sarojini Naidu. The Bombay Committee elected Herabai Tata as a delegate and she with her daughter Mithan Tata went to England.^[7]

When the joint select committee was in discussion Annie Besant warned the Committee for ignoring the women's demand. She also insisted that if the British continued to do so, Indian women would join in the political protest against them. In her speech Sarojini Naidu represented all Indian women and said that enfranchised women would make a powerful force for progress. Then she pointed out that when the word franchise was heard the idea came to certain women of the women's university start with, and Annie Besant must say in this they were greatly helped by a European women who had great knowledge of the suffrage movement here, and we applied to bring a deputation to secretary of state and to Lord Chelmsford.^[8]

Due to the lack of time Herabai Tata was asked to submit a statement. All the three argued that recent social and educated developments had restored Indian women to this former power and influence. Most of the British believed that Majority of Indian Women were uneducated and living in seclusion. Leaders like Tilak, V.J. Patel, U.P. Madhava Rao, Junniah, Yakub Hassan all supported the demand of the women while giving evidence before the Joint Select Committee on the Government of India Bill in 1919.^[9] But, the Government of India Bill, 1919 was passed without mentioning the women's franchise, one of its provisions allowed the provincial legislation councils to settle the votes for women. A group of Indian population including women was enfranchised by the Reforms Act of 1921. This right to vote stated that women could vote only if they possessed qualifications of wifehood, property and education. One after another the provincial legislatures enfranchised the women of their provinces.^[10]

In Madras the Justice Party won the election during the 1920's. As soon as it had formed the Government, the Women's India Association asked the Government to pass a resolution regarding the vote for women. So Diwan Bahadur M. Krishnan Nayar passed a resolution in the Madras Legislative council to remove the sex disqualification of women. The resolution was passed on 1 April 1921. In response to this resolution the Government of Madras was pleased to make the regulation called the Madras Electoral Sex Disqualification Removal Regulation. It stated that no woman should be disqualified by reason only of her sex for registration on the electoral role of any constituency of the legislative council of Madras.^[11]

Madras was the first province, which granted the voting right to women in 1921. The Legislative Council of United Provinces granted vote to women in 1923, Cochin and Travancore in 1923, Bengal in 1925, Central province in 1927, finally Bihar and Orissa in 1929 and completed the enfranchisement of the women of British India.^[12]

Despite Women's Indian Association full involvement in the elections of 1926 and its vigorous campaigns for the women candidates, none of its candidates won. In the face of this defeat, a deputation of Indian Women met the Governor of Madras on 25 November 1926 and urged him to take measures to nominate few women representatives to the council. They argued that women representatives in the council were an urgent need to examine various social legislation that were meant for women and children. They requested for atleast four seats in the council for women.^[13] The Madras Legislative Council finally nominated Muthulakshmi Reddy as the Deputy President by the council Muthulakshmi Reddy became the first Indian women to sit in the Legislative Council. It was during this period, many women were nominated and elected as magistrates and as representatives in local bodies.^[14]

In 1931, the British Government appointed a Franchise Committee under Lothian. In 1932, the Lothian Franchise Committee visited India to collect opinions. While giving evidence to the Franchise Committee a Muslim member of this committee named Mohammud Yakub affirmed that women's seats should be reserved on a communal basis. The committee met a small percentage of Indian women and accepted the joint memorandum, which was given by the All India Women's Organizations. This committee also rejected adult franchise.^[15] In August 1932, the Communal award was announced. The seats were reserved for women in the provincial legislatures were only 2.5 percent. In September 1932, the Poona Pact was issued which granted reserved seats to the depressed classes within the Hindu constituency. The Women's Organization opposed communal electorates and they thought that the only way to solve all these problems was adult suffrage.^[16]

The Women's Indian Association strongly opposed the proposals for the formation of separate or communal electorates for either men or women and the reservation of seats for communities and interests in the provincial councils and Assemblies as these policies would neither promote unity among the several communities, caste, creeds and races in India nor tend to the spontaneous growth of rationalism among the masses.^[17]

All India Women Conferences, Women's Indian Association and the National Council of Women in India prepared a memorandum after a long discussion. It demanded adult suffrage and objected the separate electorates and reservation of seats. The British women like Eleanor Ruthbone advised the Indian women to take back the demand for universal

Franchise and to accept reserved seats.

When the Government of India Act of 1935 was in its last stage of preparation the Linlithgow committee asked witnesses from Indian Women's Organizations. Muthulakshmi Reddy of Women's Indian Association, Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur of All India Women Conference and Begum Hamid Ali of National Council of Women in India were nominated as the spokes women before the committee. Many Memorandums were presented, and all insisted the importance in increasing the number of women voters to about five million.^[18]

In 1935, Act provided the reservation of fourty one seats for women in provincial legislatures. It gave the right to vote for women with property and educational qualifications, and wives of men of military service. In 1937 election, eight women were elected from several constitutions. In the Madras Provincial Assembly eight seats were received for women.^[19]

CONCLUSION

The number of women voters, women's representatives in assembles and parliament had increased after independence. Indian women got franchise very earlier when compared to certain countries of the world. The constituent Assembly set up in the year 1946, October, and a body elected by the existing legislatures, had among its members Sarojini Naidu, Durgabai Renuka Roy and Hansa Metha, among others to frame the constitution of independent India. Thus the seed sown by Annie Besant during the first quarter of the 20th century in the sphere of awakening of women through her Home Rule Movement and franchise movement paved the way for the entry and involvement of women in large scale in the arena of national movement. Since the women began to fight for their political rights and identify and socio-economic matters.

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